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# Participation, Job Search and Mobility, Australia

Labour participation potential, underemployment and marginal attachment, job search experience, labour mobility, hours worked, industry and occupation

Reference period February 2020

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Released 17/09/2020

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## Key statistics

- Almost 1.4 million people not in the labour force wanted a job, with 70% available within 4 weeks.
- 1.1 million, or 8% of employed people, changed jobs last year.
- 'too many applicants' was the main difficulty for most job seekers.
- Half of underemployed part-timers did not look for more hours.

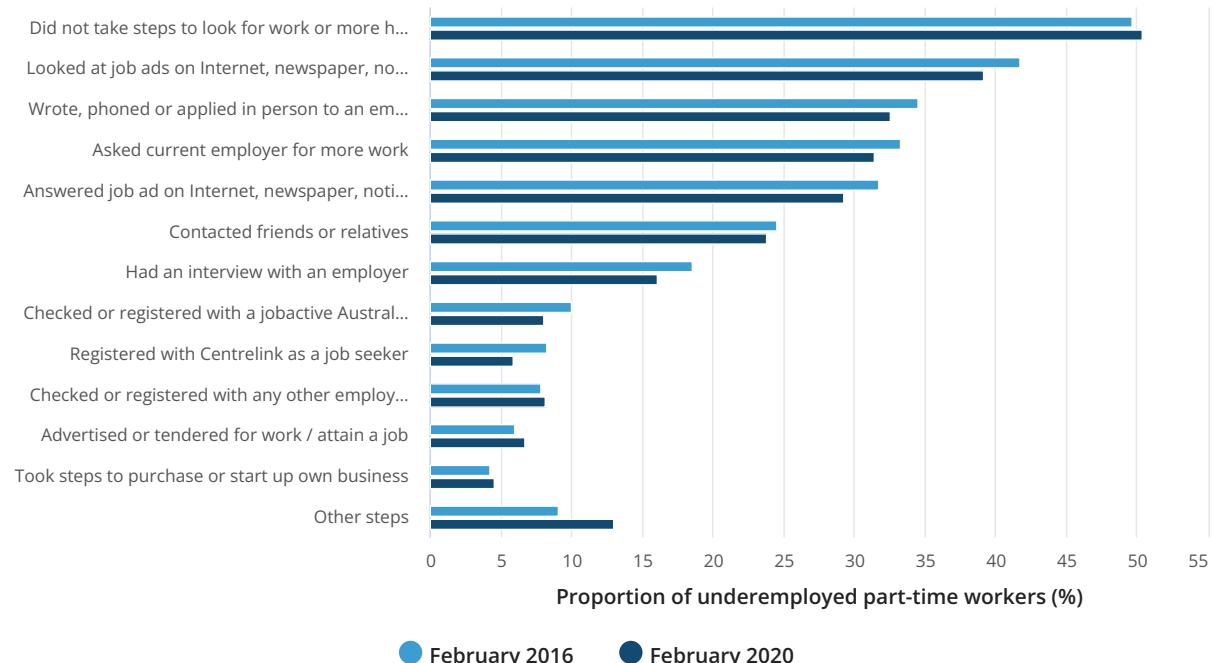
## Seeking more hours

12.98 million people were employed in February 2020, which was almost two-thirds of the civilian population aged 15 years and over (20.1 million). Of these, around 1.2 million people (9.1% of employed) were underemployed, almost all of whom usually worked part-time (1.1 million). Underemployment has risen slightly over the past few years (up from 1.1 million people in February 2016).

43.8% of underemployed part-time workers in February 2020 had been underemployed a year or more. If a suitable job had been offered, 16.1% were prepared to move interstate, and 20.6% were prepared to move intrastate.

Just under half (49.7%) of underemployed part-time workers took active steps to look for additional hours.

### Graph 1 - Steps taken to look for more work



More information about underemployment and preference for more hours for 2016 to 2020

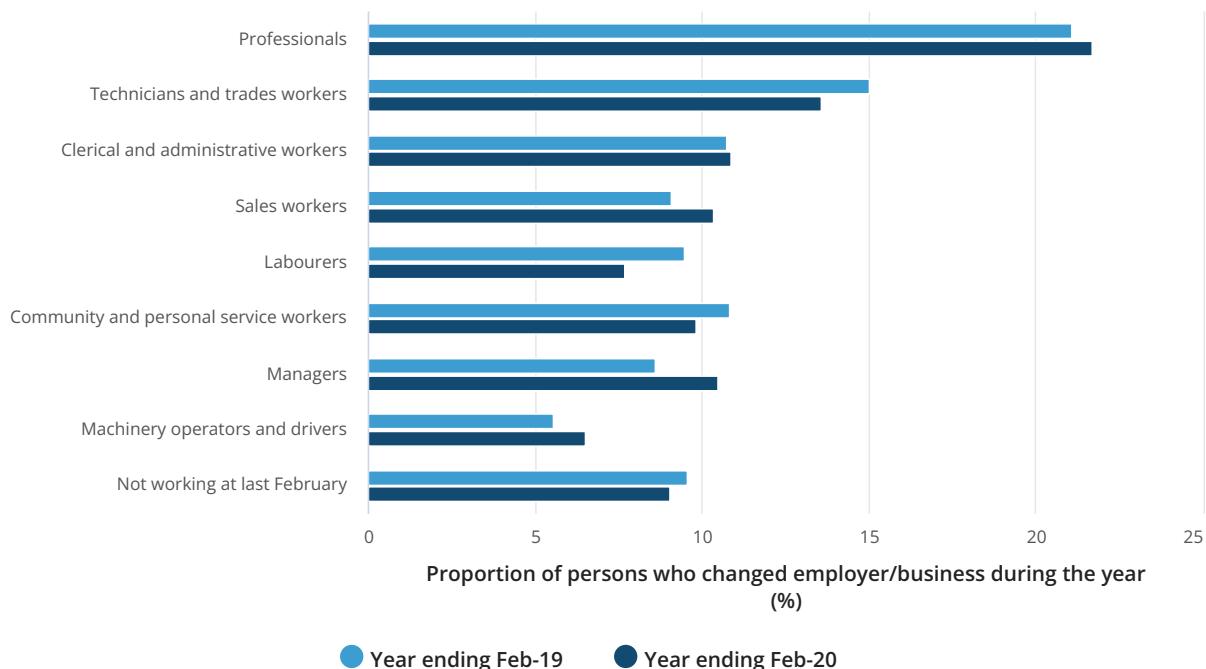
can be found in Tables 2-7 in the Data downloads section.

## Job mobility

8.2% (1.1 million) of employed persons changed employers or businesses in the twelve months up to February 2020. This was consistent with estimates of job churn reported across the year to February 2019 (8.5%).

Mobility remained highest for professionals, at 21.7% job churn for the year ending February 2020, and 21.1% for the year ending 2019. There was a considerable increase in job churn reported by managers, increasing by 19.7% (18,200 people) to the year ending February 2020. In contrast, mobility for labourers declined by 20.6%, with 21,100 less people reporting job changes in the year to February 2020, compared to the same period to February 2019.

### Graph 2 - Mobility by occupation



More information about labour mobility for 2016 to 2020 can be found in Tables 17-20 in

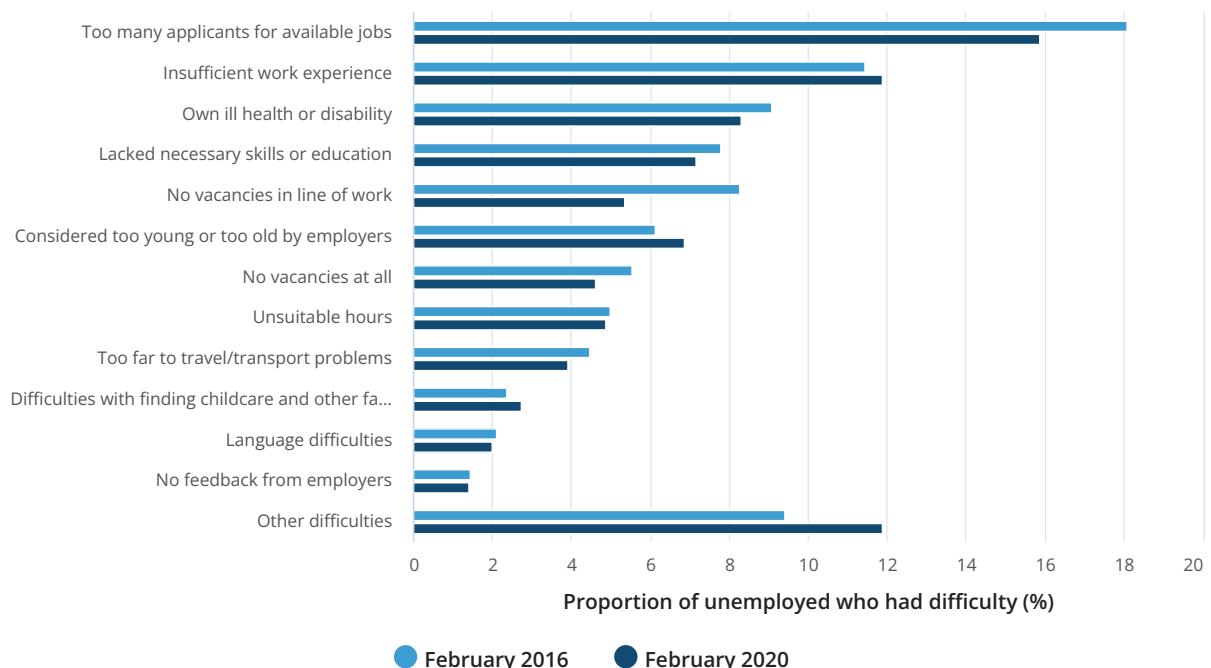
the Data downloads section.

## Seeking a job

Of the 705,600 unemployed persons in February 2020, 86.8% reported having difficulty finding work.

Reasons for difficulty finding work have changed somewhat in recent years, with an increase since February 2016 in personal factors such as "Insufficient work experience" and "Considered too young or too old by employers", and a decrease in job related factors such as "Too many applicants" and "No vacancies at all".

### Graph 3 - Main difficulty in finding work



More information about the job search experience of unemployed persons for 2016 to 2020 can be found in Tables 12-16 in the Data downloads section.

## Potential to join the labour force

Of the 6.8 million people not in the labour force (NILF) at February 2020, 1.1 million (16.3%) were marginally attached, as they wanted to work, and were either available to start work, or had actively looked for work. In line with decreases in unemployment, the proportion of the NILF population who were marginally attached also decreased slightly, down from 16.4% in February 2016.

5.7 million persons were not in the labour force and not marginally attached. The majority of these people (84.6%) did not want to work, and a further 623,600 (11%) were permanently unable to work.

► Image

► Description

- a. Includes people who 'Might want to work'
- b. Includes people who had a job to go to and could have started in the reference week - 'Future starters'.
- c. Refers to people who had a job to go to, but were not available to start in the reference week.
- d. Refers to people who were not available to start in the reference week.
- e. Includes people who are permanently unable to work and those who 'Did not know'.

For more information see article [Understanding the Australian Labour Force Using ABS Statistics \(https://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/6202.0main+features999Dec%202013\)](https://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/6202.0main+features999Dec%202013) in [Labour Force, Australia \(https://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/Previousproducts/6202.0Main%20Features1Dec%202013?opendocument&tabname=Summary&prodno=6202.0&issue=Dec%202013&num=&view=\)\\_.](https://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/Previousproducts/6202.0Main%20Features1Dec%202013?opendocument&tabname=Summary&prodno=6202.0&issue=Dec%202013&num=&view=)_.)

## Understanding labour supply

The Participation, Job Search and Mobility Survey (PJS) is a yearly supplement to the monthly Labour Force Survey (LFS). It asks additional questions from respondents regarding their participation in the labour market, and looks into the factors behind why people were counted as employed, underemployed, and unemployed or not participating in the labour force - all in respect of a single point in time, in February.

The survey focusses on people who are classified as unemployed and underemployed, or those who were close to being classified in those groups, as these people make up the

available labour market supply to meet the labour market demand of businesses looking for workers.

In the broadest sense, the total supply of workers in Australia are those who were at least 15 years old. This article explores the different groups of potential labour supply, to provide different insights into spare capacity within the labour market.

## Working and not working

In February 2020, there were 20.49 million people in the usually resident civilian population in Australia who were 15 years and over.

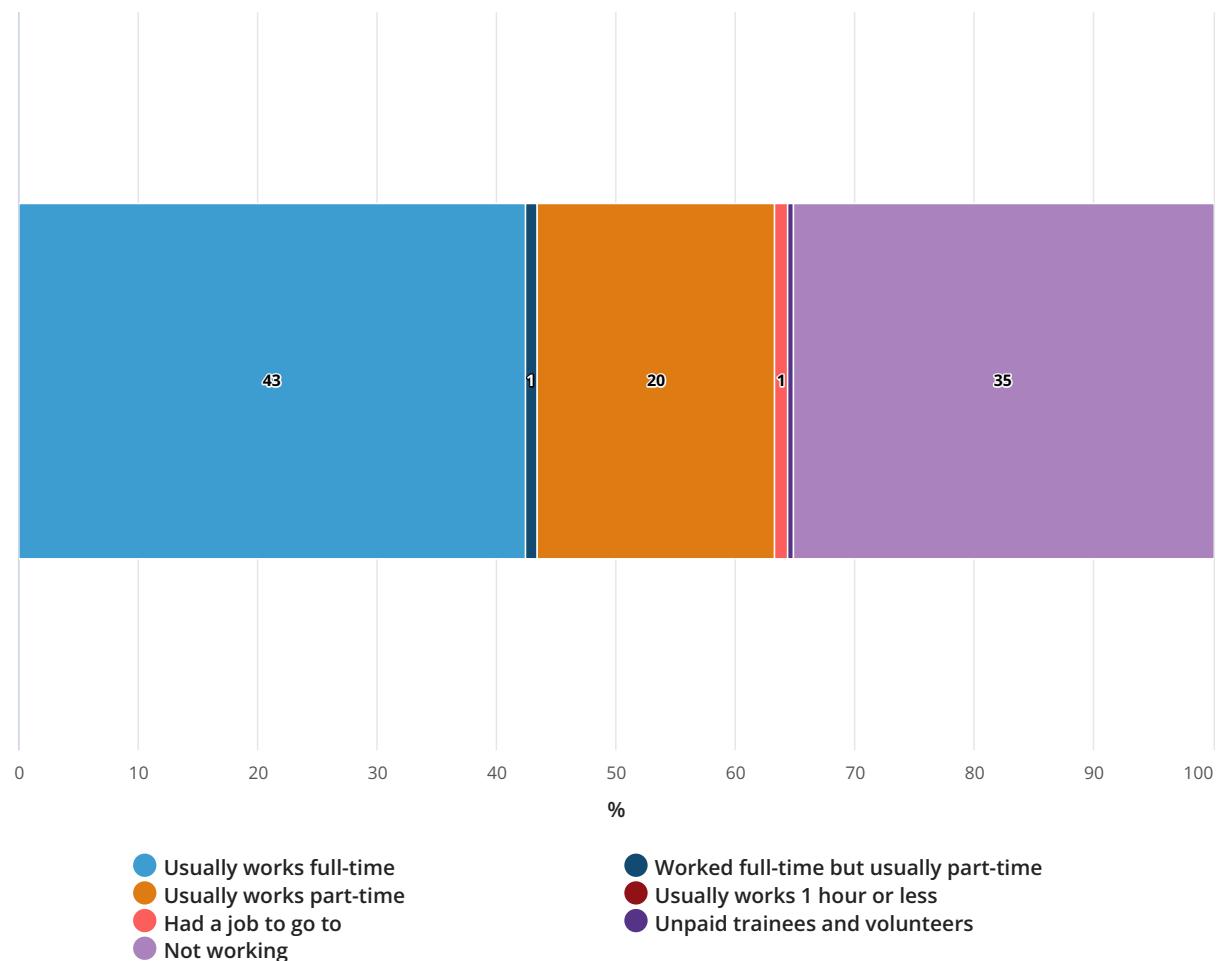
The total number of people not employed in February 2020 was 7.51 million, or 36.7% of the population 15 years and over. This group of people who were “not working in a paid job” represent the broadest group of potential labour supply for Australia in February, to combine with the 12.98 million employed population as the labour supply.

Of those who were not in a paid job in February, 118,000 people were in a job where they were occupied in unpaid activities as volunteers or trainees. A further 197,000 people were attached to a job, but they had either just accepted a job offer and had not yet started working, or they were on leave from their jobs without pay and would return at a later date in the future. These people were not yet classified as employed but were part of the available supply as they could have been working in an alternative paid job during February.

Of those who were in paid work, 4.3 million usually worked part-time hours, or 20.9% of the population. These people are also potentially part of the available supply if working less than full-time hours was assumed to indicate that someone was not fully utilised (though, in practice, the ABS asks questions to determine their preference and availability to work more hours).

This brings the total hypothetical pool of people with potential labour supply to 11.8 million people, or 57.5% of the population. Of course, not everyone over 15 years wants to work full-time each and every week. This brings us to the first condition to be classified as part of the labour supply – only including those who want to work.

### Graph 1 - Working or not working



## Working

Total working in a paid job – 12.98 million (63.3%)

- Usually works full-time – 8.70 million (42.5%)
- Worked full-time but usually works part-time – 203,000 (1.0%)
- Worked part-time and usually works part-time (for more than 1 hour) – 4.1 million (19.8%)
- Worked 1 hour or less and usually works 1 hour or less – 19,300 (0.1%)

## Not working

Total not working in a paid job – 7.51 million (36.7%)

- Had job to go to or away from work without pay – 197,000 (1.0%)
- Unpaid volunteers and trainees – 118,000 (0.6%)
- Not working – 7.20 million (35.1%)

## Wanting to work or wanting more hours

In February 2020, 2.1 million (10.1% of the population) wanted to work and were not currently working in a paid job. Of the remaining people who were not working, 624,000 were unable to work, but most simply did not want to work (4.81 million, or 23.5% of the population).

The main reason people did not want to work was because they were retired. 55.6% of those who did not want to work were retirees (2.68 million). Other people did not have time to work, such as students who were attending an educational institution (11.3%), those who were busy caring for children (3.5%) and those who had other duties around the home (12.3%). 7.0% had ill health or a disability that meant they were not seeking work. Given none of these people wanted to work, none of them were included within the potential labour supply in February.

Based solely on people's desire to work, there were 2.1 million people who were not working but wanted to work, which was around 13.8% of the combined 15.1 million workers and potential workers.

Further to this, of those who usually worked part-time hours, 1.19 million wanted to work more hours. These people were fairly evenly split between 53.0% wanting to work full-time and 47.0% just wanting more part-time hours. There were even some full-time workers who wanted to work even more hours, 634,000 people.

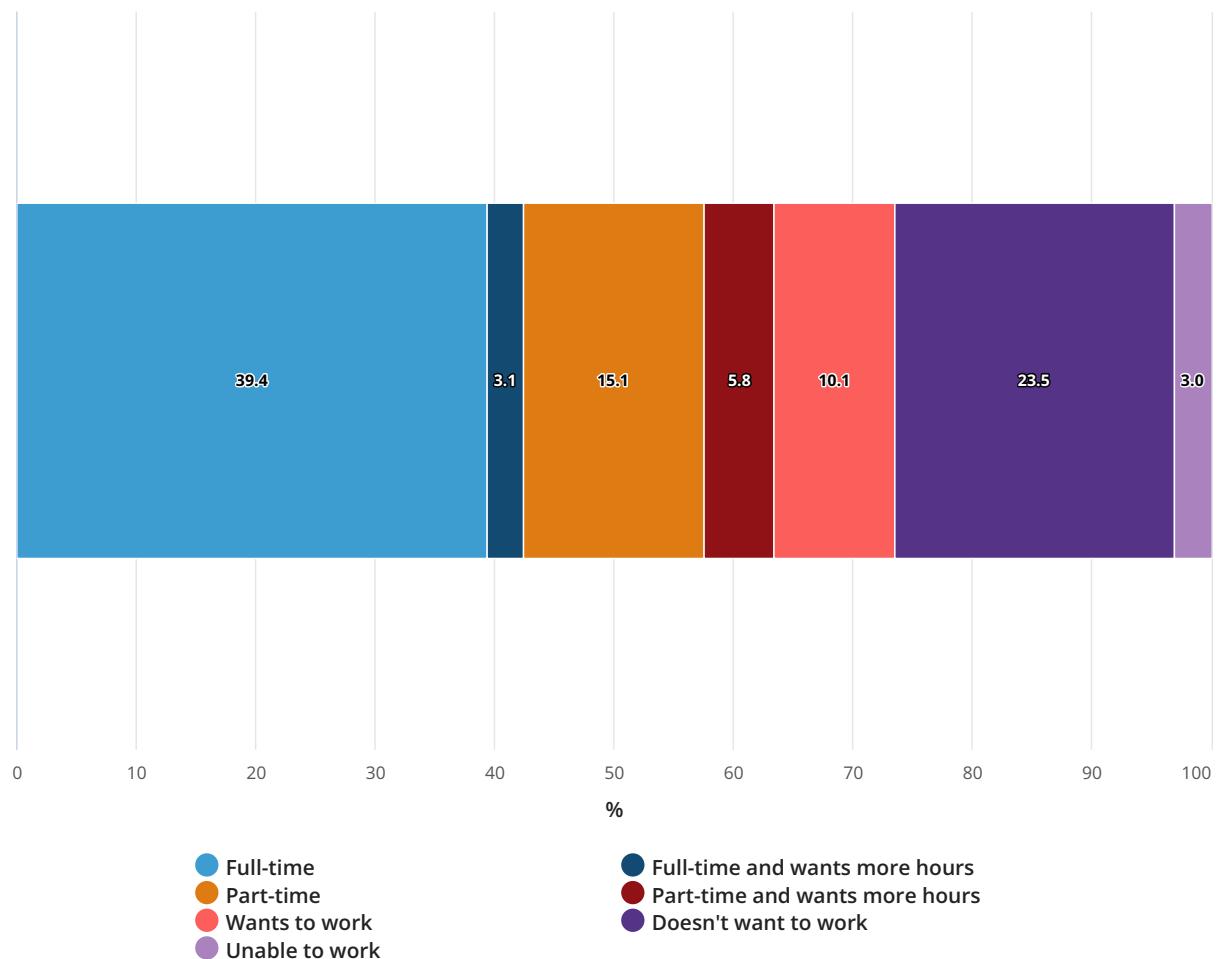
The total number of workers who wanted more hours in February 2020 was therefore 1.83 million (around 14.1% of employed people). These workers reflected around 8.9% of the total population or around 12.1% of the combined 15.1 million potential workers.

Adding two of these proportions together (13.8% and 12.1%), makes the total potential supply of underutilised workers 25.9% - a quarter of all workers and potential workers in February 2020.

Why aren't the headline underutilisation figures this high? This brings us to the second

important condition of labour supply – only counting those who were available to work.

## Graph 2 - Wants to work or wants more hours



## Wanting work

Total wanting work or more work – 3.90 million (19.0%)

- Usually works full-time and wants more hours – 634,000 (3.1%)
- Usually works part-time and wants more hours – 1.19 million (5.8%)
- Not employed and wants to work – 2.1 million (10.1% of the population)

Did not want to work – 4.81 million (23.5%)

Unable to work – 624,000 (3.0%)

## Main activity of people who did not want to work

- Retired – 2.68 million (55.6%)
- Home duties – 590,000 (12.3%)
- Attending educational institution – 544,000 (11.3%)
- Ill health or disability – 338,000 (7.0%)
- Caring for children – 171,000 (3.5%)

## Available to work

Not everyone who wants to work is available to work, and this therefore limits their ability to supply their labour. Of the 2.1 million people who wanted to work, 1.28 million were available to start working straight away, while 484,000 would be available in the next 4 weeks. The remaining 304,000 wanted to work, but were not available within 4 weeks.

There were many reasons why people were not available to work. The main reason was because they were busy caring for children (23.4%). Other reasons included a long term health condition or disability (20.5%), studying or returning to studies (18.4%), a short term health condition or injury (9.0%) or caring for an elderly person or relative (8.2%). Similarly to those who did not want to work, these people who were unavailable to work were also not included in the available labour supply in February.

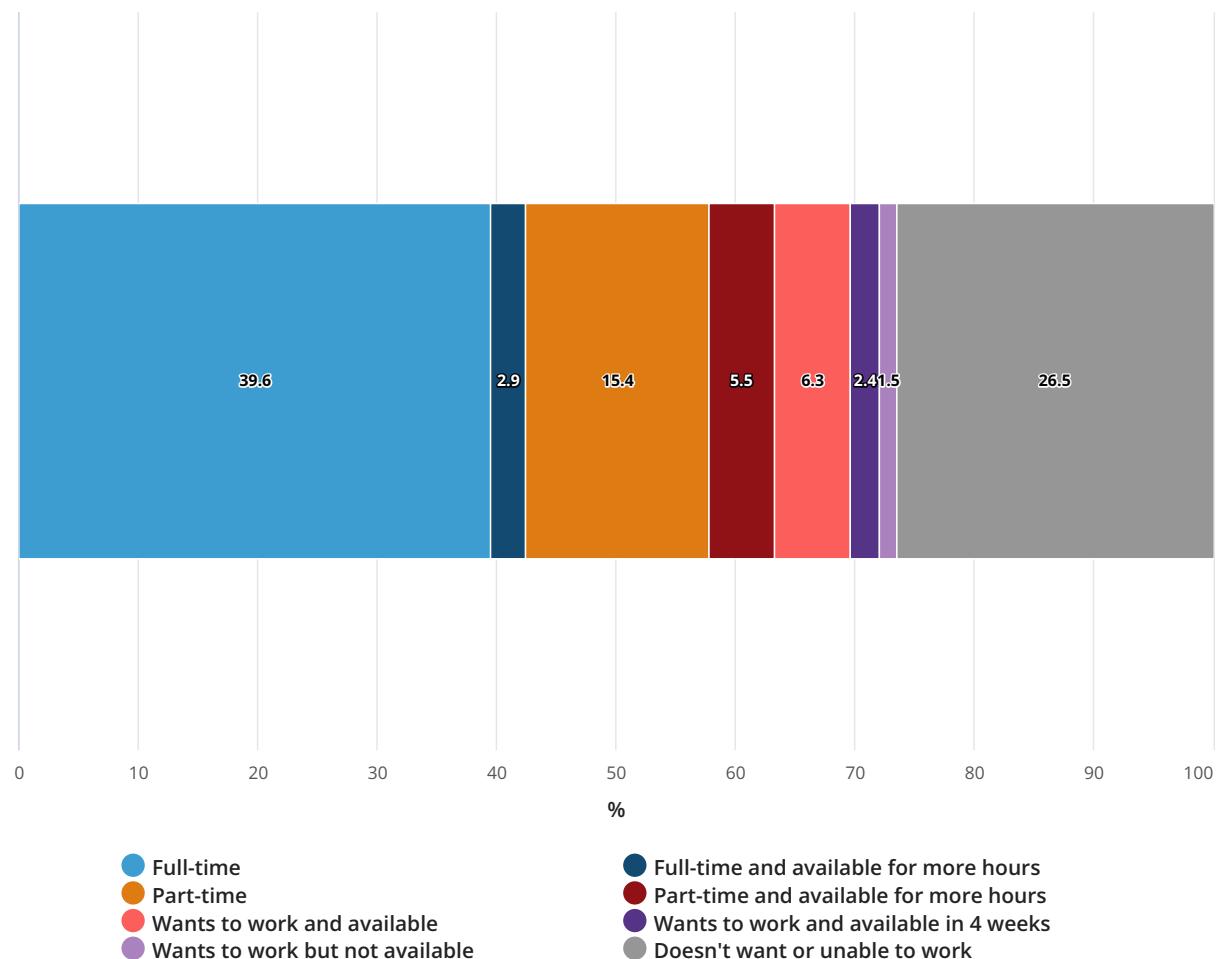
Based on these two conditions of wanting and being available to work straight away, the proportion of available workers who were seeking work would be 9.0%.

Similarly, there were fewer workers who were both wanting and available to work more hours. Of the part-time workers, 1.13 million were available to work more hours, and 602,000 full-time workers were available for more hours.

This brings the total to 1.7 million workers who were available and wanted to work more hours, or 12.1% of all available workers. Combining these percentages together creates a figure of 21.1% of the population that was willing and available to work more than they were.

Again, these numbers are higher than the headline underutilisation rates. There is a third and final important condition for labour supply – whether people were actively looking for work.

Graph 3 - Wants to work and available



## Wanting and available to work

Total available people who wanted work or more work – 3.01 million (14.7%)

- Works full-time and available for more hours – 602,000 (2.9%)
- Works part-time and available for more hours – 1.13 million (5.5%)
- Wants to work and available – 1.28 million (6.3%)

Wants to work and available in 4 weeks – 484,000 (2.4%)

Wants to work but not available – 304,000 (1.5%)

### **Main reasons people were not available to work in 4 weeks**

- Caring for children – 71,000 (23.4%)
- Own long-term health condition or disability – 62,000 (20.5%)
- Studying, or returning to studies – 56,000 (18.4%)
- Own short-term health condition or injury – 27,000 (9.0%)
- Caring for ill or elderly person/relative – 25,000 (8.2%)

### **Actively looking for work**

Businesses looking for workers can only find job seekers when they actively engage with the labour market, either through applying for vacant positions, making phone calls, registering with an employment agency, or a number of other active steps. Therefore, in order to be part of the potential labour supply to be utilised in the Australian economy, a person must be actively looking for a job. Passively looking for work may be a precursor to someone looking for work, but it is only the active steps taken to find work that will lead to their labour supply being available to employing businesses.

In February 2020, 659,000 people were actively looking for work and were available to start immediately. Another 55,000 people were actively looking and available to start within 4 weeks. 890,000 people were wanting to work and available to start within 4 weeks, but they were not actively looking for work. 197,000 people were not actively looking because they had either already accepted a job offer but had not yet started working, or they were attached to a job and away from work without pay.

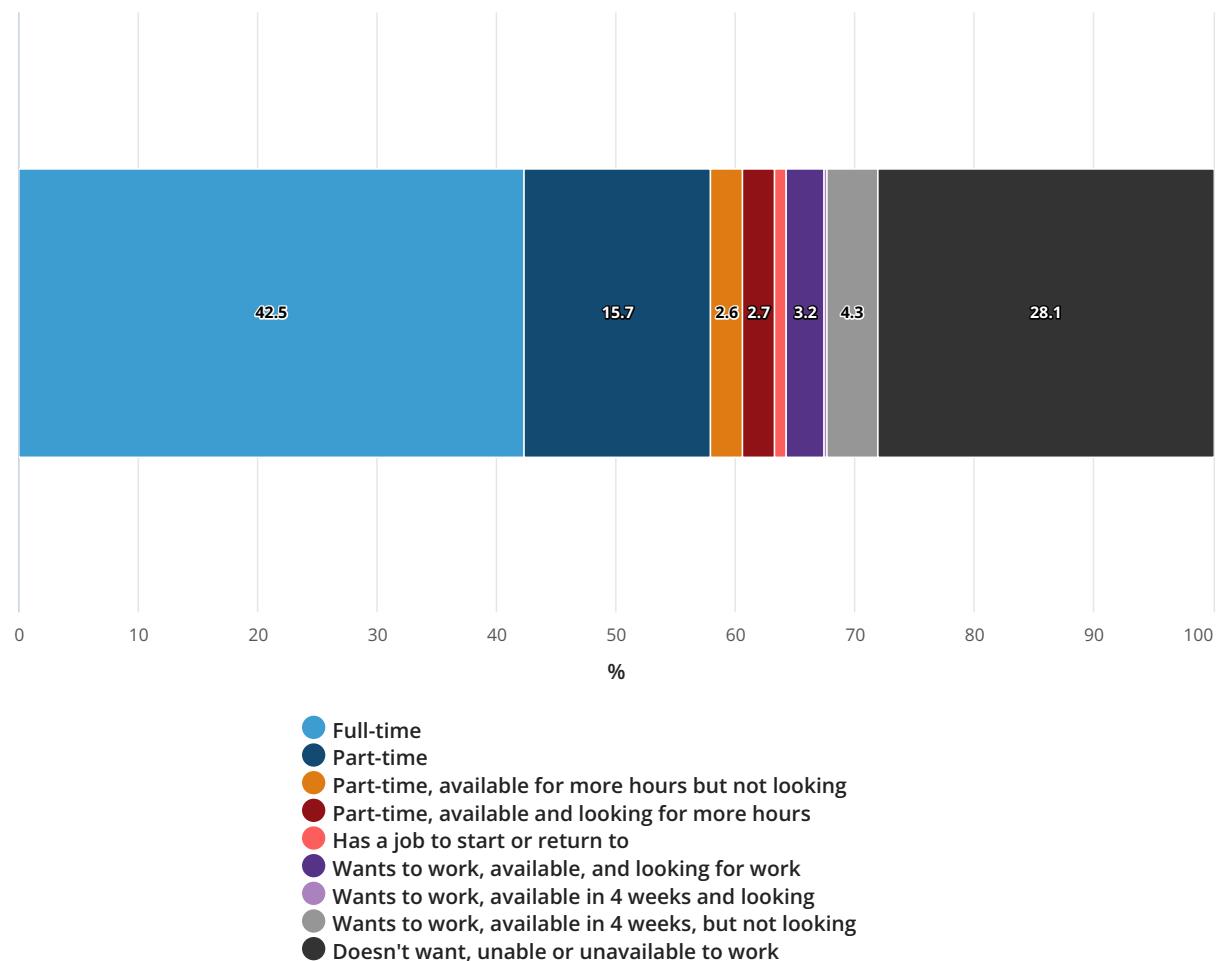
The main reasons people did not actively look for work was because they were attending an educational institution (24.0%) or caring for children (16.9%). Some people did not actively look for work due to having a job to go to but they were currently away for longer than 4 weeks without pay (10.8%) so did not qualify as employed. Other people had simply given up looking for work and were classified as “discouraged job seekers.” There were 104,000 discouraged job seekers in February 2020, and most believed they could not find work because employers thought they were too young or too old (35.4%).

When using all three conditions of wanting to work, being available to work, and actively looking for work, a measure of unemployment (in original, not seasonally adjusted terms) can be calculated at around 4.8% of the actively participating labour force.

We can also apply the same criteria to those looking for more hours, but, given underemployed workers can get extra hours within their existing employment, it is not

considered to be a reasonable limitation on underemployment. They are already meeting the requirement for being “economically active” by being employed and it would be unreasonable to expect underemployed workers to keep asking their employer for more hours every month or continuously apply for new jobs to be counted as underemployed from one month to the next.

#### Graph 4 - Available and looking for work



#### Available and actively looking for work

Wants to work, available, and actively looking for work – 659,000 (3.2%)

Total underemployed part-time workers – 1.08 million (5.2%)

- Works part-time, available and looking for more hours – 538,000 (2.6%)
- Works part-time, available for more hours but not looking – 545,000 (2.7%)

Not looking, but has a job to start or return to – 197,000 (1.0%)

Wants to work, available in 4 weeks, and actively looking for work – 55,000 (0.3%)

Wants to work, available in 4 weeks, but not looking for work – 890,000 (4.3%)

## Main reasons not actively looking for work

- Attending an educational institution – 213,000 (24.0%)
- Caring for children – 151,000 (16.9%)
- Discouraged job seekers – 104,000 (11.7%)
- Had a job to go to but away from work – 96,000 (10.8%)

## Underutilisation

The ABS uses combinations of these conditions to determine headline rates of potential labour supply and underutilisation over time, which are consistent with international standards. On the very rare occasions that a standard is changed, the ABS can draw upon the wealth of component information collected to revise and maintain a consistent time series.

The headline unemployment numbers include people who were not employed who met all three conditions: wanting to work, available to work and actively looking for work. The unemployed population also includes a small number of people who stopped actively looking for work because they had accepted a job offer, but had not started working yet ('future starters'). In February 2020, there were 706,000 unemployed people.

The headline number of underemployed part-time workers are based on two conditions, wanting more hours and also being available to work more hours. It does not require underemployed workers to actively look for work. There were 1.08 million underemployed part-time workers in February 2020.

The headline number of underemployed full-time workers are not based on the conditions explored so far. A full-time worker is considered underemployed if they involuntarily work part-time hours for "economic reasons", such as not having enough work or being stood down by their employer. It does not include workers who lost hours due to illness, plant breakdowns or bad weather, as these are not considered to be economic reasons. In

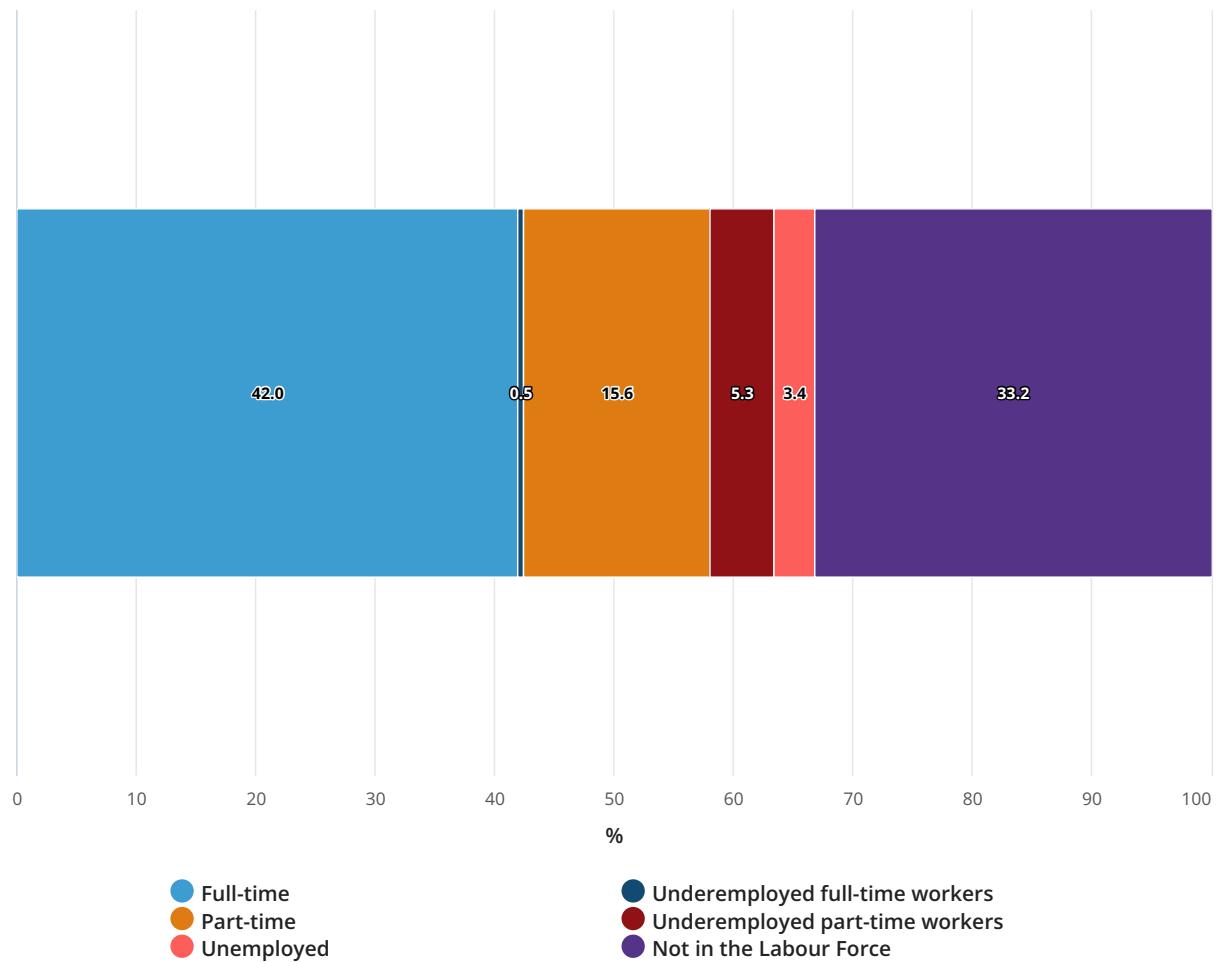
February 2020, there were 93,000 full-time workers who were underemployed.

The total labour force includes everyone who is employed and unemployed. It does not include those who do not want to or were unable to work, or those who were unavailable to start work straight away, or those who were not actively looking for work. The size of the labour force in February 2020 was 13.7 million.

Based on these classifications, the PJSM data indicates that the underutilisation rates for February 2020 were:

- Unemployment rate = 5.2%
- Underemployment rate = 8.6%
- Underutilisation rate = 13.7%

### Graph 5 - Underutilisation



Note that while the labour force categories are arranged relatively neatly in a line from "least employed" to "most employed," the reality of labour market dynamics means that people can shift between any of these categories. A part-time worker does not need to be underemployed before becoming unemployed, they could go straight into not in the labour force after losing their job. Before they even start looking for work, they could get a full-time job and bypass unemployment and go straight into employment.

### Extended underutilisation

Beyond the commonly cited headline measures of labour supply and underutilisation, the ABS also periodically produces an alternative set of broader measures that relax some of these conditions around unemployment and underemployment.

An extended measure of unemployment starts with the official definition and extends the availability criteria to include those who are available to start within 4 weeks, rather than only counting those who can start immediately. It also includes discouraged job seekers, as they meet all of the criteria for unemployment except for actively looking for work. It does not include people who were not actively looking for other reasons, such as studying or caring for children. The number of people included in this extended measure of unemployment in February 2020 was 864,400.

The extended measure of underemployment applies the same lens to both full-time and part-time workers. Regardless of usual hours worked, a worker is underemployed if they worked less than their usual hours for economic reasons, or if they preferred and were available to work more hours.

Using this measure, there were an extra 619,000 full-time workers who were underemployed, as they either preferred and were available to work more full-time hours, or they worked less full-time hours than usual for economic reasons. The total number of underemployed full-time workers under the extended definition was 712,000 in February 2020.

The number of underemployed part-time workers also increased under the extended definition, including part-time workers who worked less part-time hours than usual hours for economic reasons. The total number of underemployed part-time workers was 1.24 million in February 2020 under the extended definition.

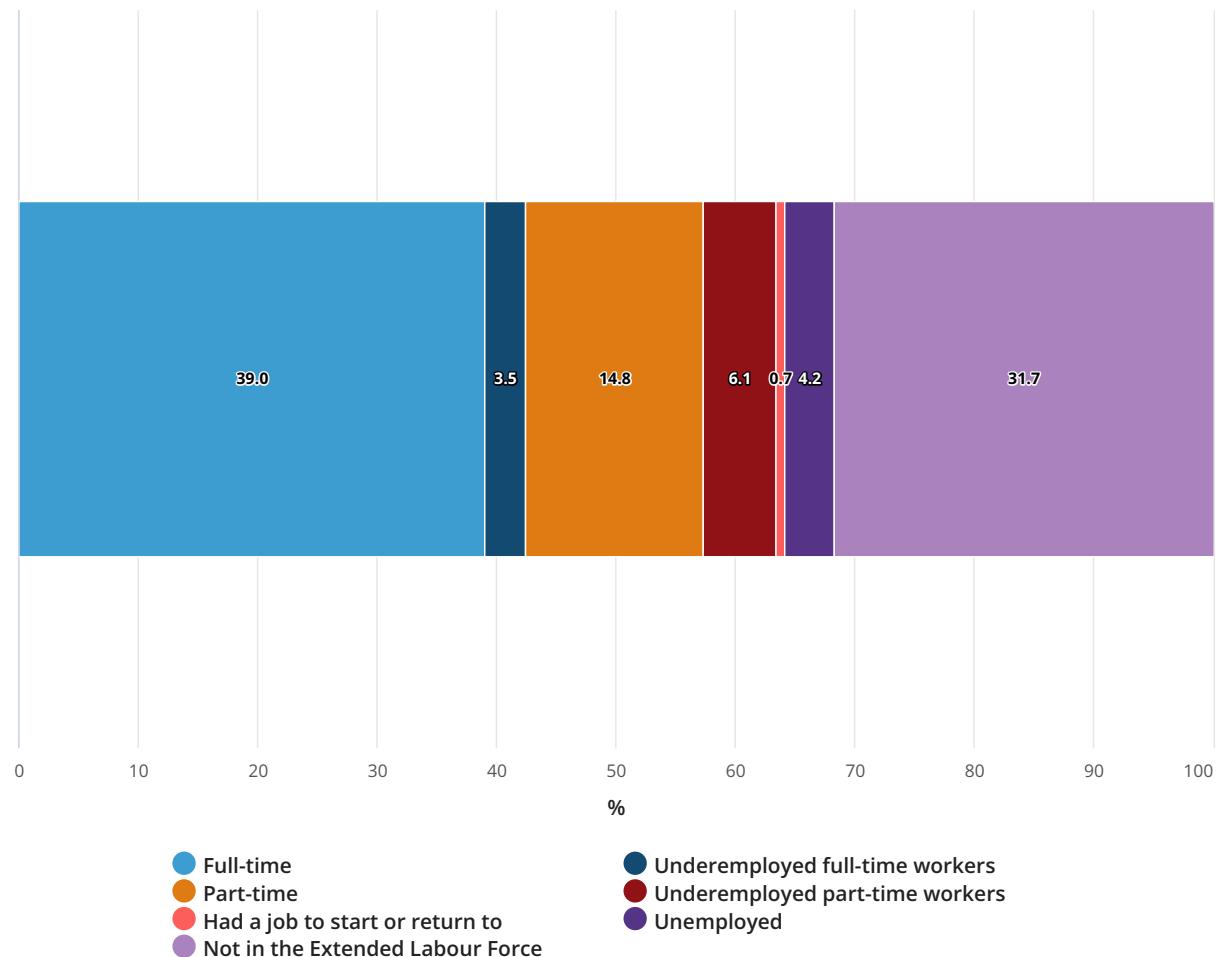
The extended measure of the labour force combines the employed and the extended measure of unemployed. It also includes some people who would normally be counted as not in the labour force, but had a job that they were either starting in the future or one they would return to after a period of leave without pay. The size of the labour force under this extended definition was 14.0 million in February 2020.

The extended underutilisation rates in PJSM for February 2020 were:

- Extended Unemployment rate = 6.2%
- Extended Underemployment rate = 13.9%
- Extended Underutilisation rate = 20.1%

Updated tables of the extended rates of underutilisation by Sex, Age, and State and Territory for the period 2016 to 2020 are available in the Data downloads section.

## Graph 6 - Extended underutilisation



## Further information

For more information on these or any other labour statistics,  
contact [labour.statistics@abs.gov.au](mailto:labour.statistics@abs.gov.au).

## Data downloads

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Table 1: Discouraged job seekers and other marginally attached persons, 2016-2020

↓ [Download XLS](#)  
[255 KB]

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Table 2: Underemployment status of full-time and part-time workers, 2016-2020

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[242 KB]

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Table 3: Part-time workers who would prefer more hours, 2016-2020

↓ [Download XLS](#)  
[243 KB]

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Table 4: Characteristics of part-time workers who would prefer more hours

↓ [Download XLS](#)  
[262 KB]

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Table 4 (historical): Characteristics of part-time workers who would prefer more hours

↓ [Download ZIP](#)  
[168.93 KB]

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Table 5: Duration of insufficient hours of underemployed part-time workers

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[328 KB]

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Table 5 (historical): Duration of insufficient hours of underemployed part-time workers

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[237.34 KB]

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Table 6: Number of extra hours preferred by underemployed part-time workers

↓ [Download XLS](#)  
[423.5 KB]

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Table 6 (historical): Number of extra hours preferred by underemployed part-time workers

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[292.02 KB]

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Table 7: Main difficulty in finding more work of underemployed part-time workers

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Table 7 (historical): Main difficulty in finding more work of underemployed

part-time workers

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[158.37 KB]

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Table 8: Characteristics of discouraged job seekers and other potential workers

[↓ Download XLS](#)

[153.5 KB]

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Table 8 (historical): Characteristics of discouraged job seekers and other potential workers

[↓ Download ZIP](#)

[191.07 KB]

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Table 9: Time since last job and main activity of discouraged job seekers and other potential workers

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[110.5 KB]

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Table 9 (historical): Time since last job and main activity of discouraged job seekers and other potential workers

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[119.08 KB]

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Table 10: Retrenchments and other reasons for ceasing a job in the last year

[↓ Download XLS](#)

[198.5 KB]

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Table 10 (historical): Retrenchments and other reasons for ceasing a job in the last year

[↓ Download ZIP](#)

[180.03 KB]

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Table 11: Main reason for not actively looking for work of persons who wanted to work and were available to start

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[246 KB]

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Table 11 (historical): Main reason for not actively looking for work of persons who wanted to work and were available to start

[↓ Download ZIP](#)

[153.55 KB]

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Table 12: Job search experience of unemployed persons, 2016-2020

[↓ Download XLS](#)

[264 KB]

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Table 13: Characteristics of successful and unsuccessful job search experience

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Table 13 (historical): Characteristics of successful and unsuccessful job search experience

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[174.22 KB]

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Table 14: Number of job offers while searching for work

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[265.5 KB]

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Table 14 (historical): Number of job offers while searching for work

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[173.57 KB]

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Table 15: Main difficulty and duration of job search of unemployed persons

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[290.5 KB]

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Table 15 (historical): Main difficulty and duration of job search of unemployed persons

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[180.25 KB]

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Table 16: Main difficulty in finding work by age group of unemployed persons

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[277.5 KB]

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Table 16 (historical): Main difficulty in finding work by age group of unemployed persons

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[172.7 KB]

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Table 17: Labour mobility, retrenchments and duration of employment, 2016-2020

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[259.5 KB]

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Table 18: Change in employment characteristics of persons employed over the last year

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[239 KB]

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Table 18 (historical): Change in employment characteristics of persons employed over the last year

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[155.04 KB]

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Table 19: Change in employment characteristics of persons employed last year by industry

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[307.5 KB]

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Table 19 (historical): Change in employment characteristics of persons employed last year by industry

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[219.91 KB]

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Table 20: Change in employment characteristics of persons employed last year by occupation

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[286.5 KB]

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Table 20 (historical): Change in employment characteristics of persons employed last year by occupation

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[201.97 KB]

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Table 21: Populations by state or territory of usual residence

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[340.5 KB]

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Table 21 (historical): Populations by state or territory of usual residence

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[263.19 KB]

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Table 22: Extended measures of underutilisation, 2016-2020

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Questionnaire

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[119.92 KB]

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All data cubes

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[4.1 MB]

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## Changes in this issue and upcoming changes

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[Show all](#)

Regular rebenchmarking

Since 2018, the PJSM microdata have been rebenchmarked every year to reflect the most

recently available release of [Estimated Resident Population \(ERP\) \(https://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/3101.0\)](https://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/3101.0) data and Labour Force Survey population benchmarks.

The microdata weights for 2016 to 2020 data have been revised to incorporate the population benchmarks that were used to produce estimates published in the March 2020 issue of [Labour Force, Australia \(https://abs.gov.au/statistics/labour/employment-and-unemployment/labour-force-australia/latest-release\)](https://abs.gov.au/statistics/labour/employment-and-unemployment/labour-force-australia/latest-release).

### **Trend factor adjustments**

To reduce the impact of seasonal and irregular effects on total employment and unemployment, the benchmarks have been adjusted by factors based on trend Labour Force Survey (LFS) estimates (as published in March 2020).

For example, February estimates have a typical seasonal pattern of higher unemployment. The factors applied reduce the number of unemployed, to match trend LFS estimates.

Trend factors have also been applied to underemployment benchmarks, based on the monthly LFS estimates published in March 2020.

For more information, refer to the Methodology page.

### **Relationship in household**

During the quality assurance of the publication [Labour Force Status and Other Characteristics of Families \(https://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/6224.0.55.001\)](https://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/6224.0.55.001), the ABS identified an issue with some family coding which affected a range of key family estimates - particularly during the period 2015 to 2018.

For this reason, data items relating to family characteristics have been removed from this release of PJSM microdata and will be available in a future release.

### **Coronavirus (COVID-19)**

The ABS is currently monitoring for potential impacts from the Coronavirus (COVID-19) on Labour Force statistics and will continue to do so for the period of the pandemic.

Quality assurance of data for February did not identify any notable impact to headline statistics. The reference weeks for February fell in the first half of the month, at a point where there was only a relatively low number of confirmed COVID-19 cases within Australia and before it was declared a global pandemic.

### **Impact of bushfires**

Bushfires resulted in disruption to ABS data collection operations for the Labour Force

Survey and the accompanying Participation, Job Search and Mobility Survey (PJSMS) in some regions in New South Wales and Victoria during January 2020. A few areas in New South Wales, particularly within the 'Capital Region', were also unable to be surveyed in February 2020. As a result there was a lower sample of responding households in these regions in February.

The disruption from the bushfires did not have a notable impact on key headline statistics for the Labour Force Survey for February and no additional statistical interventions were required.

### **Impact of Townsville floods in February 2019**

Flooding in Townsville in February 2019 resulted in a major disruption to the operation of the Labour Force Survey. Given the severity of these disruptions, which affected almost the entire region, and to ensure that this loss of sample did not affect data for Australia and Queensland, the ABS imputed sample for Townsville for February 2019. The imputation drew upon previous information that had recently been collected from people in Townsville.

Users of the Townsville data, and totals for 'Rest of Queensland' data, should exercise some extra caution when looking at any movements from or to February 2019 for these regions.

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## **History of changes**

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### **Show all**

12/08/2020 - Understanding Labour Supply article released.

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## **Previous catalogue number**

This release previously used catalogue number 6226.0.

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## **Methodology**

[Participation, Job Search and Mobility, Australia methodology, February 2020](#)